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“EATING THIRDS”

Flavel Shurtleff

The Paper was 60 pound Copperplate, winter blue, and when Kensta carried it into Ethan Drake's office she held it like a sacred stone. Ethan knew how she felt. The Paper came from his father's personal collection and Ethan had been approved for the Rare Material Grant two weeks before. Giving Keir Talbott a personal note was not only a generous honor but a deserved one. Talbott had been working at PierceCon for eighty years, since Ethan had graduated from unitech in 2810. Kier Talbott had trained Ethan in genetic testing and gene cloning. It was Kier who had cured Ethan's migraines with a dose of zinc and goat embryo.

“Does he know he's getting a Note?” Kensta half whispered as she gently set the plasticase on his desk. Even through the milky film on the case, the Paper seemed to gleam at them.

“No, he doesn't.” Ethan warned, glaring at her. “And you wont say a word. Right?”

She shook her head and put her hand on her heart. “I promise!” She took a step back but paused, glancing at the case on the desk.

He looked at her. “Something else?”

She grinned, fifty-two years old of giggling girl. “Can I see it?”

He smothered a smile and removed the top of the case. The Paper did gleam: blue and creamy light like the sky in December. Kensta gasped. “It's beautiful.”

Ethan was silently awed. His house aromatron had ancient-forest scent that the robo-maids used, but the air that came past his face as he lifted the lid was pure, sweet pine breath that held him momentarily speechless. He reached

down and brushed the top of the stack with his fingers. He had never felt it before.

Kensta looked at him. "What's the price of Paper?"

"Yesterday's New York Tech Exchange price? Euro 940,000. An ounce."

She exhaled slowly. "I want a raise."

Wilson Drake looked old.

Ethan stopped in the doorway of his father's office with his hand on the urethane doorknob. He tried to maintain composure. There were bags under Wilson's eyes, almost dark, and Ethan noticed for the first time a bit of loose skin hanging under his chin. "My God," he whispered.

Wilson waved a shaky hand at his son. "Close that door. Stop looking at me like I'm a corpse. Did you write the Note?" His voice snapped with an anger Ethan had never heard.

Ethan held a transparent case in the air with the Note inside. He had used platinum-royal for the ink, stenciling the message that his father had dictated that morning. Ethan could not stop looking at him as he slid the envelope across the desk. "How bad is it?"

His father stared back across the great steel expanse. "The Dose is proving unstable. Unstable!" He looked at his son with shiny terror. "Our damn cloning system is falling apart before my eyes. Just look at me!"

Wilson Drake was two hundred and four, the oldest man in the world and the only man approved by the government for After-200. It was Wilson and Ethan's ancestor, Pierce Drake, who in 2092 had discovered the process that came to be known to schoolchildren around the world as pierce-transfer. By injecting uranium-soaked cells of rat reproductive organs into human hosts, Pierce discovered that these tainted cells copied and absorbed the human cells in rapid repetition, and thus practically stopped the aging process. He harnessed the speed of this reproduction with thyroid neutralizing compound that eventually became known in its most common form as a bi-monthly pill called the Dose. The Dose purged the body of skin disease, acne, and melanomas. Contact lenses and hearing aids became obsolete. 75 percent of registered diseases vanished from the International Medical Monitor by the start of the 24th century. The life span of humans rose from 79 in 2092 to 235 in 2150. By 2250, Drake's company, PierceCon, had developed a way to clone the active ingredient in the Dose and eliminate the use of rats altogether. When the Population Crisis of 2400's overtook the planet and women were restricted to a maximum of two children, the Dose had become a way of life.

But now the Dose was failing, and his father was failing before him. In his father's eyes Ethan saw world economies crumbling into crevasses of crow's feet.

"How widespread?" Ethan slumped down in the platinum guest chair.

"We're just seeing the start of it. Hell, I'm 204 and I'm still holding it together. Most complaints are coming from Hindi-China, but they're mostly unemployed. Europe is starting to talk. West America seems to be clean, but it's the same cells for God's sake!" He motioned again with his hand. "But this is all in the past. In the past. Keir Talbott's found something."

Ethan leaned forward. "A cure?"

His father looked at him and nodded. "Yes. A breakthrough."

When Ethan entered his parents house that evening, the first person he saw was his 140 year-old mother standing in the middle of her marble foyer. Gwynavive Drake's shimmering backless carbon sheath draped over her willowy frame like silver mercury. He saw she was wearing the big guns; her teardrop earrings of bleached birchwood and the priceless necklace made from the page of an authentic circa 1960s magazine devoted to the St. Kennedy Assassination. The famous blonde hair had been pulled severely back and she had a single daisy stem tucked above her left ear.

"Darling," she cooed, grabbing his hands, "you did manage to come! Wonderful! Your father said you would but darling, you know how you are!"

Ethan kissed her lightly on the cheek. "Hello, Mother. The daisy is beautiful."

Gwynavive laughed and lightly touched the petals. "Tell your father, darling. He's calling the bankers to have me cut off." She looked over his shoulder. "Why don't I see your wife and my gorgeous grandson?"

"Sara has euthanasia cases and Hollis didn't have a nap. They both send their love."

She tisked and touched the diamond shaped pendant with Kennedy's face that hung against her chest. "Poor dears. Really, Ethan, Sara does work too hard. Euthanasia, darling! Too grisly for me," she chirped.

He laughed and glanced over her shoulder. "Mother, you will live forever. Where's father?"

She motioned toward the east wing. "In the virtual room with that Talbott fellow. Please go and save him, darling, I have the Shah of France here for God's sake."

Ethan maneuvered through the scattering of celebrities that his mother had gathered until he came to the closed double doors of the virtual room. He knocked lightly on the ornately carved steel and let himself in.

Keir Talbott stood up from the sofa, nodding with nervous glee. "Mr. Drake." Even with Dose he looked pale and tense. Ethan noticed light sweat on his forehead.

Wilson Drake waved him down from a captain's chair by the bar. "Sit down, Talbott, sit down. You may be in management someday. Can't keep standing up to everyone." Ethan saw his father was very drunk.

Ethan was vaguely annoyed that his father used him for that particular lesson, but he smiled and extended his hand. "Keir. I hear you've saved the world."

Keir remained standing and kept nodding. "Yes, sir. I mean no sir, well, I don't know sir."

"For God's sake Talbott, sit down!" Wilson thundered. "You're making me shake with that nodding of yours! Ethan, did you see your Mother? A daisy! A daisy!"

Ethan smiled and went to the bar. "What have you found, Keir?"

"Well, sir, I discovered in my research---" Talbott began, but was interrupted by Ethan's pager. Wilson groaned from the silicon easy chair and Keir took a step back, bowing slightly. Ethan mouthed an apology as he placed the receiver to his ear. "Ethan Drake."

"Ethan get home!" his wife Sara screamed from the other end. "It's Hollis. God, come quick, come quick!" then she was gone. So was he.

Ethan barely remembered going home. The light from the third floor nursery shone brightly in the dark night as he sped up the laminate driveway of his estate. He left the electrode in the ignition as he dashed out and up the wide steel stairs of their porch. When he burst through the double front doors, he saw the down-stairs robo-maid pacing the foyer and clenching her hands. She saw Ethan and almost screamed.

"Mr. Drake, thank goodness. Mrs. Drake is upstairs and---"

But he was already running up the circular staircase, two at a time, flying past the shocked looks of the upstairs staff and up to the third floor.

Sara Drake was in the nursery, holding their son tight to her chest. She turned when Ethan came in and ran towards him.

"A freckle, Ethan! A freckle! Look. Under his arm." She was hysterical, her hair loose and wild around her face. Hollis was screaming in terror, his horrified face peering at his mother in wretched fear.

Ethan snatched him from her. "Show me."

She fumbled with Hollis' wrap. The Shoulder casing slid off of his smooth, pink arm. She lifted it. It was there. A tiny, dark spot barely visible in the chubby curl of his shoulder. Ethan jerked slightly, and brought his son close to his chest. He soothed incoherent words of comfort as terror gripped his heart.

"I found it tonight. After his nap. What the hell is going on, Ethan?"

He mouthed for her to hush with the baby over his shoulder. She bit into her knuckle and turned from him, stalking towards the crib. She began to pace.

"It's the Dose, Ethan, you said so yourself. You're father has wrinkles, Ethan! Wrinkles and eye bags! Your mother is getting face-lifts every five days! Five days! She told me herself!" She turned in the middle of the room and raised her arms in helpless terror. "A freckle! Dear God!"

His head was whirling. Hollis was calming down, sniffing slightly with his back towards his mother's terror. Ethan whispered over Hollis' shoulder. "Don't worry, Sara. We're figuring it out. We're solving it. I promise."

Sara looked at him across the room, her hand running back through her hair as she looked at their only child. "What is it? What's wrong?"

He sighed. "The cloning process is breaking down. Slowly, but it's breaking down. The Dose isn't pure anymore."

Sara had moved to the window and was looking blankly outside. "Clone more goddamn rats."

"Rats are extinct, Sara," Ethan said in a tired voice. "You know that."

She cursed. "Well, what then?"

"We'll see," he whispered, gently bouncing his son to sleep over his shoulder.

The journey from the executive offices of PierceCon to the underground labora-

tories was a sterilization elevator that cleansed every occupant for the entire thirty-story ride to the bottom. Ethan was silent as the vaporizing mist blew lightly over himself, his father, and Keir Talbott. Talbott was more fidgety than usual, making sure to shake Ethan's hand when they met that morning. Ethan noticed a new graphite suit and tie.

At the bottom the laser doors shut off and they walked down the short hallway to the receiving room. Danny, the morning guard, smiled a greeting to the men. "Good morning, gentlemen," he said calmly. "I believe they're ready for you."

Wilson nodded and showed his ID. Danny slid the plastic card across his palm and behind him, the double doors to the labs parted. They walked into a small cubicle, completely white, and the doors closed behind them. For a moment, Ethan was blinded by whiteness.

"So, Talbott," Wilson said in a soft voice, "Show Ethan what you've been working on."

And with a press of a remote attached to Keir's lab coat that Ethan had not seen, the wall facing them slid downward in a smooth, fluid motion.

The cribs covered the full expanse of the labs, lined next to each other in perfect rows of sterile incubation. Ethan counted fifteen rows of 10 before the room vanished into a gradual darkness. He could see that blue electrodes had been attached to each of the infant's skulls while tiny eyecups were taped to the side of their heads. Monitors were attached to each crib. He could not see the screens. Every child was crying. Ethan heard no sound, only saw the twisted faces and gaping mouths.

"The tears, Ethan," Wilson Drake said in a wide-eyed wonder. "Infant tears! The purest DNA available and you should see what it does to the cloning process. You should see, my boy! Our tests show proposed longevity of 240, 300 years! Think of it!"

Keir Talbott moved forward, bowing to Ethan as he spoke nervously. "Mr. Drake, they're third Thirds. Illegal third children of women who have already reached their two-child maximum. These infants have not been Dosed, Mr. Drake. They're not like us. Or our children. They're Thirds, sir." He sounded apologetic.

Ethan stared into the seemingly endless space. He felt his fingers digging into the palms of his hand. The reflection of flashing images shone from the babies' faces. In the darkness of the far reaching back, he saw flashes of light and then, when he closed his eyes, he could actually hear synthesized thunder peeling from speakers inside.

"What's on the monitors?" Ethan whispered, frozen.

"Just flashing lights, sir" Talbott squeaked, "and angry animals. Bears, lions."

"A breakthrough, Ethan," Wilson Drake whispered, "A miracle." He was pressed against the window, his fingers spread tightly against the plastic.

Ethan said nothing as they left the labs and went back upstairs. His Father gave Keir the Personal Note in his office, shaking his hand and calling Kensta in to take a digital of all three of them shaking hands. Ethan moved through the ceremonial politeness with ice in his heart. Talbott didn't notice. He had almost passed out when he received the Note. His Father did notice however. When they were leaving, Wilson Drake held his son back.

"Thirds, Ethan. Illegal births by deviants. You know this. They're not Dosed. They can't feel like we do. Like Hollis does."

Ethan looked at his father and saw that he was using the new cells already. The bags were gone, the skin was smooth and taut. Wilson Drake's jaw line was firm as he looked at Ethan. "This is the history of man, son. We're a part of it. You have to think what could happen." He paused, looking flustered. "Thirds are a threat to our civilization! Think of the population, Ethan! We can't have a repeat of the 25th century. We would be eating ourselves again in a matter of years."

The nanny was holding Hollis when Ethan came into the nursery. She nodded a greeting and slipped the sleeping boy into his arms. Ethan Excused her and she quietly left the room. Hollis stirred in the shift of arms and blinked his eyes several times in sleepy surprise. He started to cry.

Ethan kissed Hollis, whispered in his ear and placed him safely in the bassinet. Hollis calmed and drifted back to sleep. Ethan stroked Hollis' wet cheeks, touched his chin and gently placed the new Dose patch on the back of the baby's chubby leg. Hollis slept in the quiet moonglow from the nursery window and Ethan watched him, gently licking his own fingertips, still stained with the child's tears.